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Rural Homelessness

What we've learned,
What we need to do next

A Report on the Findings and Implications of RECD's Rural Homelessness Conferences

United States Department of Agriculture

Rural Economic and Community Development

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Foreword

Homelessness in rural America is a complex, challenging problem that has long been overshadowed by the more visible and recognizable plight of those who are homeless in our cities. To be homeless in rural America today is to be part of a population that is all too easily ignored: widely dispersed, under-counted, under-served, inadequately understood — in short, all but invisible.

President Clinton has directed federal agencies, acting through the Interagency Council on the Homeless, to pursue a coordinated strategy to break the cycle of homelessness and to help prevent future homelessness. Toward that goal, Rural Economic and Community Development (RECD), the area of the Agriculture Department charged by Congress with major responsibility for serving the needs of rural communities, has taken a key step in carrying out the President's directive by doing something that government agencies are often accused of *not* doing: *listening.*

In 1995 RECD organized a series of informal regional conferences to provide opportunities for policymakers to hear the insights and experiences of scores of Americans who know about rural homelessness first-hand — either because they work with homeless people as advocates and program administrators or because they are, or have been, homeless themselves.

These workshops provided an invaluable window on an aspect of American life that requires much greater attention. What we heard, what we learned, and what we need to do next are the subjects of this report.

We learned, among other things, that the problem requires some redefining, because the urban model of homelessness research and policymaking based on surveys of shelters and service providers does not fit with rural realities. And we saw that the problem is both multi-faceted and stubborn — because it is deeply embedded in and inseparable from the patterns of persistent poverty that are part of the fabric of so many rural areas.

But we also learned that rural traditions of self-help and community assistance can play a crucial part in promoting enlightened, cost-effective approaches to homelessness. By better understanding the problem, by linking resources and expertise, and — perhaps most importantly — by supporting and leveraging the powerful rural work ethic, we can do much to address and alleviate the problems of rural homelessness.

JILL LONG THOMPSON
Under Secretary,
Rural Economic and
Community Development

Introduction

RECD's Rural Housing Service develops strategies and administers programs to promote adequate, affordable rural housing and thus to help build strong, sustainable rural communities. At a time of rapid change and economic uncertainty in much of rural America, this is no small challenge.

We are grateful to the President, the members of the Interagency Council on the Homeless, and the many members of Congress who have voiced support for a coordinated approach to the national problem of homelessness that will match resources with needs. This is vitally important in rural America, where the needs are great and the resources are chronically stretched thin.

Rural homelessness does not take place in a vacuum. Before people lose their homes, they almost always suffer other major setbacks: the loss of a job (or a series of jobs); the breakup of a marriage or a family; the loss of a viable community, or the sense of belonging to one; the loss of opportunity and the absence of support systems. Accumulating losses perpetuate the cycle of homelessness. Strategies to address the problem of rural homelessness must thus address a spectrum of other challenges as well.

To build a broader base of knowledge at the national level about the causes, characteristics, and trends of rural homelessness, we decided to take a direct approach: to bring together homeless people, advocates, and program managers in a series of informal working conferences where the main item on the agenda was to stimulate broader understanding of the problem.

One of the many lessons learned from these conferences is that those who have become homeless are unfairly stigmatized by generalizations. It's easy to think of "the homeless" as people who, for whatever reason, just can't cope. But it's important to recognize that in rural places where good jobs and affordable housing are scarce, people who are working hard may be just a paycheck away from homelessness.

In making policy, then, the beginning of wisdom is to bear in mind that homeless rural Americans are, above all, individuals with individual needs. Time after time, conference participants stressed that point — and, in that spirit, this report proposes no sweeping, one-size-fits-all solutions to the problem of rural homelessness. Instead, it underscores the importance of continuing to learn more about what already works — and reinforcing community efforts that are already under way.

This report also outlines an action plan — a set of measures that RECD/RHS is initiating to reach out to those who have become homeless or who are at risk

of losing their homes, and to stretch our resources by carefully coordinating our activities with those of other public and private agencies.

The main body of the report that follows was written by Dr. Martha R. Burt, a nationally recognized authority on homelessness who directs the Social Services Research Program of the Urban Institute. Thomas N. Bethell edited the report and wrote the Executive Summary. RECD/RHS is grateful to them both for their contributions to this important project.

It may seem unduly optimistic to be attempting to alleviate rural homelessness at a time when public and private agencies alike are operating under difficult funding constraints. As these conferences demonstrated, however, throughout rural America there is a powerful sense of commitment and dedication on the part of advocates, service providers, and, most notably, on the part of those who have had first-hand experience with what it means to be without a home. We share that commitment and hope to contribute to building a rural America where, one day, the problem of homelessness will be part of the past.

MAUREEN KENNEDY
Administrator,
Rural Housing Service

Executive Summary

Rural homelessness *is a complex and challenging problem, both for those who are most directly affected — the rural Americans who find themselves without a place to call home — and for the policymakers, program administrators and advocates who seek to serve their needs. This report summarizes the findings and implications of a series of regional conferences on rural homelessness organized in 1995 by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Economic and Community Development (RECD)[1] administration in cooperation with numerous public and private agencies and organizations, under the auspices of the federal Interagency Council on the Homeless.*

Both this Executive Summary and the main body of the report are organized as follows:

I. Rural Homelessness: Overview

On any given day, how many rural Americans have no place to call home? No one knows — although rural service providers do know that the numbers are large and growing. In the absence of any comprehensive national surveys of rural homelessness, estimates of the scope of the problem are unavoidably imprecise. The fact is that "homelessness" is harder to define in rural areas, and the rural homeless population is harder to count.

Conventional definitions of homelessness, developed for use in urban areas, do not fit well with rural realities. The Department of Housing and Urban Development requires, for example, that people must be "literally homeless" — i.e., sleeping in a shelter or on the street — in order to qualify for targeted assistance. But there are few shelters in rural areas, and few people sleep on the streets of rural towns.

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[1] Created under the Federal Crop Insurance Reform and Department of Agriculture Reorganization Act of 1994, RECD replaces the former Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) and Rural Development Administration (RDA), administering programs through three rural development services: the Rural Business-Cooperative Service (RBS), the Rural Housing Service (RHS), and the Rural Utilities Service (RUS).

Instead, rural people without a home are likely to be living in a shack or shanty, often without plumbing or heat; in a car or camper parked in the woods or on public lands; or sheltering with relatives in housing that may be substandard as well as overcrowded. They are unlikely to be served by agencies specifically charged with helping homeless people, both because such agencies are rare in rural areas and because homeless rural people are often reluctant to ask for help. As a result, they are relatively unnoticed.

People who are homeless, or perhaps just a few steps away from it, are highly vulnerable to the uncertain rural economy. In areas that have long depended on single industries — notably farming, mining, and timber — the continuing decline of employment in these industries takes a heavy toll and has a ripple effect, reducing work opportunities for everyone, especially the least skilled. Others are on the downside of economic growth: living in areas that are experiencing a boom in vacation-home sales, they find themselves priced out of the market for land and housing. Similarly, other rural people are displaced by suburban sprawl, which replaces modest land and housing values with upscale tracts and developments.

Available data suggest that, overall, the rural homeless population includes disproportionately high numbers of mothers and children, veterans, and others who may not necessarily have a long history of homelessness. For many, losing a home is directly connected with losing a job — or with being unable to find employment after moving to a community where jobs were said to be available. Others may be holding down a job, or multiple jobs, but not making enough to pay for shelter in addition to food and clothing.

In one way or another, many of those who find themselves homeless in rural areas are in transition. Some were trying to move from one city to another when their luck ran out and they found themselves without funds alongside a rural stretch of interstate highway. Others — usually women, often with small children — were fleeing from an abusive relationship and went as far as a tankful of gas would take them. And still others are migrant laborers who were searching for seasonal work when they exhausted their resources, leaving them stranded in a rural area.

These are some of the ways in which rural homelessness has a different face from its urban counterpart. In some other respects they may have much in common: drug and alcohol abuse appear to be widespread, although less so than in inner cities; health care — particularly important for homeless young mothers and children — is often inadequate at best.

If there is any advantage to being homeless in a rural rather than an urban setting, it may lie in the fact that in many small towns the word "community"

still has meaning: people know each other and try to look out for each other. Families down on their luck may be too proud to ask for help, but when they really need it, someone is likely to be there — with a bag of groceries, a loan, a no-questions-asked examination at a clinic, or the offer of a place to stay until things get better. There are fewer strangers in rural America.

On the other hand, many rural people feel so stigmatized by being homeless that they will not even use the word, and some local leaders simply refuse to admit that homelessness exists in their communities. And even where denial is not part of the problem, in rural areas there may be fewer opportunities for recovery from homelessness.

Although many rural communities have become adept at helping homeless people through active networking among service agencies, these agencies, serving large areas and dispersed populations, are typically over-extended. Rural-area homeless shelters are rare, as are transitional housing and job training opportunities. Jobs, even when available, are likely to be low-wage, lacking benefits and security. Joblessness in many rural areas remains high — and with industries in many metropolitan areas continuing to "downsize," rural people who had previously outmigrated to urban jobs are returning, adding to the rural surplus of employable but unemployed people.

Rural homelessness, in short, is no temporary phenomenon: it is here to stay. And, in the larger context of a nation struggling with unresolved economic, social, and racial challenges, the problem can be expected to grow worse.

Generalizations about "the rural homeless," however, obscure the fact that they are, above all, *individuals* — people who may not have a place to call home but who still have the vital resource that rural Americans have always had: a powerful work ethic. Given a decent chance to break out of the cycle of homelessness, most will seize the opportunity. The overriding challenge, then, is to do a better job of helping people to remain in or return to the mainstream economy — in other words, to do a better job of preventing homelessness before it occurs as well as coping with it after the fact.

II. What We've Done, and Why

During 1995, RECD in partnership with numerous federal, state, local, and private agencies sponsored a series of four regional conferences on rural homelessness, held in Columbia, South Carolina; Hood River, Oregon; Casa Grande, Arizona; and Columbus, Ohio. RECD organized these conferences as part of our response to President Clinton's mandate to federal agencies to develop a coordinated plan to break the cycle of homelessness

and to help prevent future homelessness, with particular emphasis on redirecting current programs to provide links among housing, support, and other services and to promote cooperation among housing and service providers and advocates for homeless individuals and famiies. Our first priority was to *listen to the voices of experience* — providers of housing and other services, advocates, and, most importantly, people who have direct personal experience with homelessness.

More than 700 participants — a diverse group including many homeless people as well as policymakers, program administrators, shelter supervisors, social workers, and other advocates for homeless people — were asked to share what they know about rural homelessness, about services and networking to serve homeless rural people, about what programs seem to work for themselves and for their communities, and about what policy recommendations they would offer to further assist homeless rural people and to help prevent homelessness.

These workshop-based conferences were designed to advance several goals:

- *Make the problem more visible:* Increase awareness of rural homelessness within RECD and among other federal agencies;

- *Learn what works and why:* Explore how federal and other programs are being used in rural areas, and identify limitations and/or barriers to their use;

- *Make federal programs more effective:* Develop an understanding of how RECD programs and initiatives, in particular, can be structured to fill gaps in the network of available rural services;

- *Build partnerships:* Learn how to overcome problems of funding, geography, and definitional issues in order to create and sustain a climate of active, effective cooperation among advocates and policymakers at all levels.

III. What We've Learned

Obviously there are regional differences in the nature of rural homelessness — the Southwest, for example, attracts people in winter who then may or may not move on as the seasons change — but a striking aspect of all four regional conferences was that they developed common themes:

• **Rural homelessness is widespread:** The problem exists throughout rural America, not just in areas with struggling economies. Although homelessness may be more evident in rural areas that have long been dependent on agriculture or on declining extractive industries (mining, lumbering), it is also present in rural counties experiencing economic growth. Poor people living in poor communities are undeniably more likely to experience homelessness, but people living at the economic as well as geographic fringes of developing areas such as ski resorts and second-home rural counties are also likely to be at greater risk than is generally recognized.

• **Rural homelessness has a different face:** Panels of currently and formerly homeless people drove home the point that rural and urban homelessness can be quite different. The ranks of homeless rural people appear to include more intact families, for example, as well as people with recent work experience. There are also homeless subgroups, such as migrant workers and Native Americans, who for the most part have no urban counterparts.

• **Rural homelessness doesn't fit urban definitions:** HUD's definition of the "literally homeless," i.e., people who are living on the street or in a shelter, is too narrow to capture the range of homeless and near-homeless situations found among rural people. In rural areas, a more accurate working definition of homelessness is "people without a place to call home" — a phrase that is broad enough to include people who are sheltering with relatives as well as those who are living, on the move or otherwise, in shacks, cars, and trailers (the kind of "housing" that would ordinarily be condemned in urban areas). Partly because of definitional issues, HUD programs based on the urban model are not as effective in alleviating homelessness in rural areas.

• **Rural and urban homelessness share some key characteristics:** Among rural as well as urban homeless people, mental illness, alcoholism, drug abuse and other disabling conditions are widespread. In rural areas, however, these kinds of problems are much less likely to be identified and addressed, partly because homeless people tend to be less visible and partly because support services either are spread thin or simply do not exist.

• **Rural homelessness is symptomatic of larger rural problems:** Large numbers of homeless and nearly homeless rural people would become self-sufficient if they had access to more job opportunities, affordable housing, and community services. Accordingly, part of the challenge of addressing rural homelessness is to reinforce the rural social infrastructure as a whole rather than focusing on homelessness as such. In particular, many conference participants stressed the importance of working through existing, mainstream social services agencies rather than attempting to create a new structure of homeless-specific services.

• **Prevention is the key to alleviating rural homelessness:** Although this finding may seem self-evident, the fact is that rural America is woefully short of resources with which to identify individuals and families who are at risk of becoming homeless, let alone to intercede on their behalf. There is an urgent need for additional outreach — which in rural areas is inherently more difficult and costly — and for the coordinated programmatic approach envisioned by the President.

• **Better networking and coalition-building are needed:** Because of isolation, distances, insufficient resources, local attitudes and politics (including denial of the problem), rural service providers may be unaware of what has worked elsewhere and may have difficulty organizing effective service networks. At the same time, the providers who have generally been most successful in helping homeless people have done so informally and non-bureaucratically, suggesting that efforts to create broader awareness of and sensitivity to the problem are nearly as important as formal strategies to alleviate it.

• **Rural housing programs can help:** At least three types of rural housing problems contribute to homelessness. In rural areas on the urban fringe, affordability is usually the main problem. In rural areas where the job base is growing — as in some second-home and vacation areas — the lack of vacant housing may be the main problem. And in many rural communities, much of the existing housing is substandard, severely overcrowded, or both. Accordingly, programs to support low-income housing construction and rehabilitation as well as to provide rental assistance and transitional housing are vital to the success of any strategy to alleviate rural homelessness.

• **Homeless rural people are not without resources:** Their most important assets are the twin rural traditions of *community* and *self-help*. "The smaller the town, the more willing everyone was to help," as one formerly homeless conference participant succinctly described her experience. The stigma of homelessness should not be underestimated: willingness to ask for help is crucial, as is willingness to listen. Clearly the single most vital resource that homeless rural Americans have, however, is the rural tradition of self-reliance. Many homeless people in rural areas have had a succession of bad breaks. With sufficient support, they will rebuild their lives — and homes.

IV. What We Need To Do Next

Rural homelessness is obviously not the kind of problem for which there could ever be a quick fix. Even if the resources available at the federal level were much greater than they are today, the problem is too thoroughly woven into the fabric of rural America to be separated out and addressed in isolation

from other needs. RECD, however, as an agency whose mission is to address the entire array of rural development issues, clearly has a role to play in helping to alleviate homelessness as well as the conditions that lead to it.

Within RECD, these conferences represent a first step in creating heightened awareness both of the rural homelessness problem and of the important work being done by service providers on behalf of homeless people. Staff from 35 RECD State Offices attended the conferences, and many reported that this was their first opportunity to fully explore the extent of the problem and to appreciate the dedication and hard work of the organizations that are on the front lines addressing the needs of homeless individuals and families. With the staff conference participants taking a lead role, RECD now has an opportunity to stimulate greater awareness throughout the agency.

As this process continues to evolve, RECD's State and National Offices will be able to contribute to networking and coalition-building in several ways:

- **Broaden networking at the national level** under the auspices of the Interagency Council on the Homeless, especially to strengthen ties to nonprofit organizations and philanthropies interested in focusing on rural homelessness issues. To promote networking among federal agencies, RECD expects to work more closely with the Department of Housing and Urban Development on definitional and shared service-delivery issues; with the Department of Labor on employment and jobs-training programs; with the Department of Health and Human Services on comprehensive health care issues; with the Department of Transportation on issues related to rural outreach and public transportation; with the Department of Education on school-based programs to increase awareness of homelessness and to support adult education; and with the Department of Veterans' Affairs, through its Program CHALENG, on efforts to serve the large numbers of veterans among the rural homeless population.

- **Join statewide homeless coalitions** (which now exist in nearly all states), with the RECD State Office's Homeless Coordinator working in partnership with coalition members from rural areas. One immediate benefit of this activity is to increase the probability that within a given state the problems of rural as well as urban homelessness will receive balanced attention.

- **Create a network among RECD State Homeless Coordinators** to share information — particularly on what works and where in the broad area of homelessness prevention — and to provide assistance and training.

- **Intensify efforts to work with others on rural development issues,** recognizing that homelessness is in many if not most cases related to the absence of basic economic opportunities as well as support services.

Programmatically, RECD is committed to the use of agency resources to complement local efforts to help homeless people, including steps to:

- **Market program inventory housing to qualifying homeless persons** in cooperation with local homeless service providers;

- **Promote use of the community facilities program** to support services to homeless individuals and families;

- **Encourage use of self-help and other housing resources** to promote the transition to self-sufficiency among homeless persons;

- **Set aside earmarked Section 502 housing loan funds** for homeless rural people, working in partnership with nonprofit organizations serving homeless individuals and families who are demonstrably on their way to self-sufficiency but who lack housing;

- **Promote training in homelessness issues** for rural rental housing managers who seek to accommodate homeless people, in particular by linking rental housing managers with local advocates and service providers;

- **Consider setting aside a number of rental assistance units** at the national level for State Offices to draw upon in situations where a local homeless coalition working in partnership with RECD can use a rental assistance unit to help a homeless person or family make the transition to a non-rental-assisted RECD rural rental housing unit.

On the broader front, RECD has a role to play in developing a better fit between public programs in general and the problems of homelessness. Several priority needs have been identified as a result of the conferences:

- **Develop and adopt more flexible definitions:** As previously noted, programmatic definitions of homelessness developed for urban use are not only a poor fit with rural situations but may stand in the way of efforts to address rural needs. For example, "building condemned" is a category that qualifies a household for aid from public housing authorities, but the category is meaningless in rural areas that lack building codes. Similarly, homeless people may be denied benefits if it is determined that they have a "home" with relatives — even if they are sheltering with relatives only because of being homeless. Repeatedly, conference participants suggested

the need for a flexible definition of rural homelessness that encompasses a continuum of housing distress, linked to a funding stream that allows service providers to provide housing relief regardless of where people are on the continuum. This approach would facilitate appropriate allocation of McKinney Homeless Assistance Act funds as administered by HUD and could be particularly useful in supporting efforts to anticipate and prevent rural homelessness.

- **Reinforce existing agencies rather than building new ones:** On the question of whether funds to address homelessness should go to homeless-specific services, the view was widespread among conference participants that in rural areas it makes more sense to enhance the capacity of the existing mainstream (i.e., broad-spectrum) social services network rather than trying to build a new structure of homeless-specific services. In particular, there is an enormous need for additional resources to address substance abuse and mental health problems whether associated with homelessness or not. As a compromise, federal agencies with responsibilities for meeting rural needs may want to explore opportunities to provide earmarked funding to mainstream agencies actively integrated into the homeless services network.

- **Encourage a flexible approach to rural homelessness:** A fundamental theme running throughout the conferences was that rural needs are different from urban needs and must be addressed accordingly, in ways that go beyond resolving definitional issues alone. For example, most rural areas cannot support — and arguably do not need — specialized shelter facilities for subgroups (e.g., single men, single women, families, single-parent families, etc.). As a rule, rural shelters serve anyone who has no home to go to. Accordingly, federal funding guidelines that downgrade an application because a shelter does not serve specified subgroups are inappropriate to rural areas and have the effect of reducing funding to such areas. Rural realities require reinterpretation and, in some cases, may require rewriting of existing guidelines and regulations, as well as suggesting the need for a more flexible approach in future initiatives.

- **Support outreach and improved communications:** Isolation is the arch-enemy of efforts to alleviate rural homelessness. Outreach is not a luxury; it is often the only way to initiate or sustain services to homeless people. Existing agencies need additional resources for staff outreach, including transportation costs. They also need better communication aids, from fax machines to computerized on-line networking, intake information, record-keeping and program updates. Improved technology cannot end rural homelessness, but by reducing the isolation of service agencies it will leverage their ability to address the full range of homelessness problems.

- **Develop better data:** Finally, there is an obvious and pressing need for improved information on both the numbers and the needs of the rural homeless population. Public and private agencies alike have an obligation to support efforts to conduct local, statewide, regional and national surveys specifically focused on rural homelessness. Accordingly, RECD has provided funding through the Interagency Council on the Homeless to support a national survey by the Census Bureau of rural as well as urban homeless assistance providers and clients. The first phase of this survey (provider interviews) is currently under way, with the second phase (user interviews) scheduled for February 1996.

Under even the most optimistic of scenarios, rural homelessness is unlikely to receive the attention it deserves until the scope of the problem and its implications can be better quantified. Similarly, measuring the effectiveness of various strategies to alleviate rural homelessness requires having better data than is now generally available. Conversely, however, the absence of nationwide rural homelessness data should not be allowed to become a pretext for inaction. RECD's 1995 conferences demonstrated, beyond doubt, that the problem of rural homelessness is widespread, severe, and growing. Our challenge in the months ahead is to ensure that (1) rural homelessness receives the attention that the problem requires, and (2) the resources available are put to the best possible use in helping to meet the needs of those who are without a place to call home. ■

RURAL HOMELESSNESS

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A REPORT ON THE FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS OF RECD'S RURAL HOMELESSNESS CONFERENCES

by

Dr. Martha R. Burt

Martha R. Burt, Ph.D., is the director of the Social Services Research Program at the Urban Institute, Washington, D.C. She has been involved in social policy research and evaluation since 1972. Her work on homelessness began in 1983, and in 1987 she directed the first (and still the only) nationwide survey of homeless individuals. She is the author and editor of numerous articles and reports on homelessness, including Over the Edge: The Growth of Homelessness in the 1980s, *published by the Russell Sage Foundation and the Urban Institute Press in 1992.*

I. Rural Homelessness: Overview

Homelessness has been on the American policy agenda for more than a decade. In that time, research has contributed significantly to our knowledge of the issues, and advocacy has resulted in commitment of public resources to address the problem. But the prevailing images of homelessness, models of services, and analyses of causes have been almost exclusively urban. Census and other data, however limited and flawed, clearly indicate that this is a distortion. In the 1990 Census efforts to count the homeless population, rural areas accounted for more than one in six (17 percent) of the people found in shelters and outdoor locations.[1] And more recent research by the Kentucky Housing Corporation has found, in many of the state's rural counties, levels of homelessness rivaling some larger cities.[2]

What is "rural"?

Part of the problem of understanding rural homelessness is that there is no single definition of "rural" for statistical purposes. The Census Bureau, the Office of Management and Budget, and the Department of Agriculture all have different ways of identifying "rural" areas. Not only do the definitions vary, but none of the definitions is adequate either to encompass all of the communities we usually think of as rural *or* to exclude communities that we usually do *not* think of as rural.[3] This leads to a dearth of relevant statistics about rural populations in general and about homeless people in rural areas in particular.

For RECD's purposes, the "rural" communities toward which it targets its funding and programs are those with fewer than 25,000 inhabitants. In this report, statistical data on homelessness from the U.S. Census are analyzed using this RECD definition. However, state and local data, where available at all, usually are collected on a county-by-county basis, and are presented that way here.

Describing the rural homeless population

Information about people who experience homelessness in rural America comes from a variety of sources. The most universal and consistent source, albeit very limited in the type of information available, is the 1990 Census survey of people who were found in shelters and certain outdoor locations on March 20-21, 1990. A few special research projects conducted in rural locations provide much more in-depth information about individuals in their samples, but have the disadvantage of not covering all of rural

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[1] M.R. Burt, L.Y. Aron and D. Chaplin, *Homelessness in the 1990 Decennial Census*, Urban Institute, Washington DC, 1994.

[2] Kentucky Housing Corporation, "Toward Census 2000: Rural Kentucky Study," paper presented at "Toward Census 2000: Focus on the Homeless" Conference, Suitland MD, November 1993.

[3] M. Hewitt, "Defining 'Rural' Areas: Impact on Health Care Policy and Research," in *Health in Rural America*, Rutgers University Press, 1992.

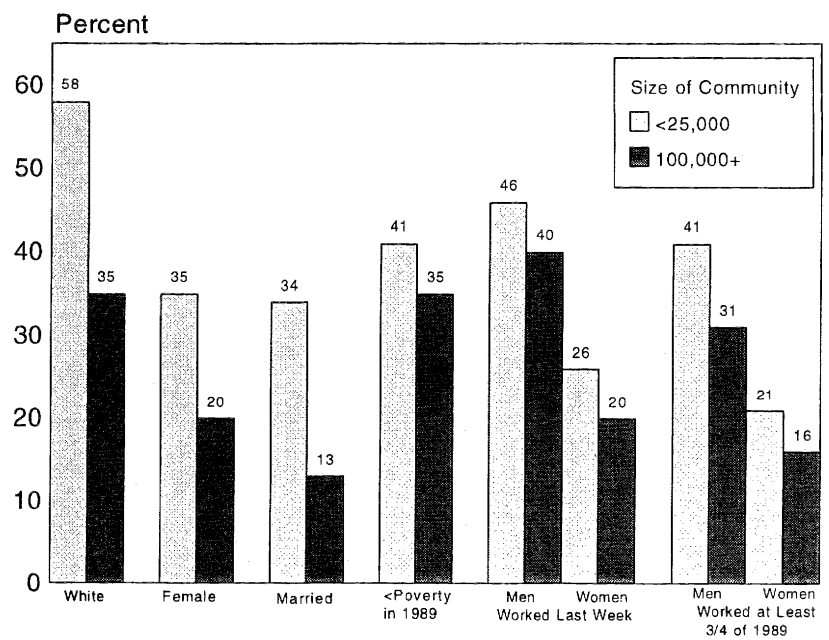
America.[4] More recent efforts undertaken for administrative purposes can give us, for whole states, a picture of homeless people who seek services.[5] Finally, we have the testimony given at these conferences by rural homeless advocates, service providers, and people who are themselves currently or formerly homeless. Each of these sources contributes to the overall picture of what homelessness looks like in rural America.

Characteristics

All of the sources just cited highlight several characteristics as more prevalent among rural than among urban homeless people.[6] Exhibit 1 summarizes information from the 1990 Census about people found in emergency shelters.

Exhibit 1: Characteristics of Rural and Urban Homeless Populations

1990 Census Street-and-Shelter-Night Data Comparing Communities of <25,000 and 100,000+



[4] R. J. First, B. G. Toomey, J. C. Rife and E. A. Stasny, *Outside of the City: A Statewide Study of Homelessness in Nonurban/Rural Areas*, Ohio State University, College of Social Work, Columbus, OH, 1994; D. Roth et al., *Homelessness in Ohio: A Study of People in Need*, Ohio Department of Mental Health, Columbus, OH, 1985; L. Stark, Presentation at RECD Conference, Casa Grande, AZ, May 1, 1995; G. Vernez et al., *Review of California's Program for the Homeless Mentally Disabled*, Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, CA, 1988.

[5] Arizona State Housing Coordination Office, "Results of January 1995 Survey," Department of Economic Security, Tucson, AZ, data presented at RECD Conference, Casa Grande, AZ, May 1, 1995; Kentucky Housing Corporation, op. cit.; Michigan Interagency Committee on Homelessness, "The State of Homelessness in Michigan," Lansing, MI, 1995; New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services, *Emergency Shelter Commission Annual Report, 1992*; G. Owen, J. A. Heineman and M. R. Decker, "Homelessness in Minnesota: A Summary of Key Findings from a Statewide Survey Conducted on October 24, 1991," Wilder Foundation, St. Paul, MN, 1992.

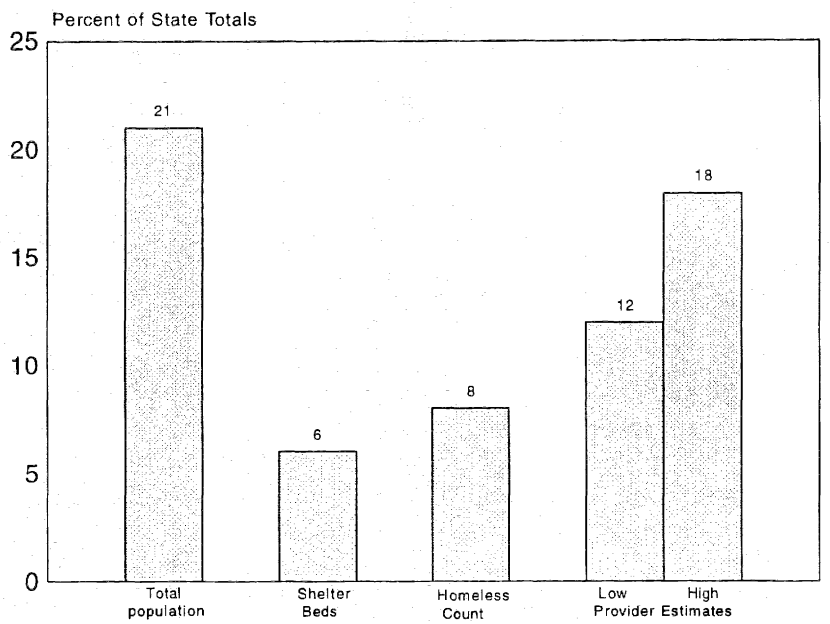
[6] The figures in this section are based on the definitions of homelessness used in the original data collection. Definitional issues are discussed elsewhere in this report.

The Census survey found that in places with fewer than 25,000 inhabitants, shelter users were more likely than those in large cities (over 100,000 population) to be *white* (58 vs. 35 percent), *female* (35 vs. 20 percent), and *married* (34 vs. 13 percent); to have *worked in the last week* (men: 46 vs. 40 percent; women: 26 vs. 20 percent); to have *worked full- or part-time for at least three-fourths of 1989*, the last full year prior to the Census (men: 41 vs. 31 percent; women: 21 vs. 16 percent); and to have *had incomes above the poverty line in 1989* (41 vs. 35 percent).[7] But note that some of these differences are not very large.

Data from several states can give us a sense of urban-rural differences based on county boundaries and the designation of some counties as urban and others as rural.[8] Exhibit 2 summarizes population and shelter data from Arizona.

Exhibit 2: Arizona Homeless Shelter Data, January 1995

Proportions for 'Balance of State' Counties



[7] The 1990 Census Street-and-Shelter Night procedures are generally considered to have been reasonably complete for homeless people in formal shelters, but the census procedures for "visible in the street" homeless were seriously deficient. Since many rural areas lack formal shelters, the Census Bureau's reliance on these structures is likely to have introduced a bias of unknown magnitude against including rural homeless persons. The "street" component of the 1990 census was in all probability equally inadequate in rural and most urban areas; only a few major urban governments even attempted the work necessary to identify a significant number of relevant outdoor locations for the Census Bureau to search.

[8] No two states are alike in the data they collect or in the methods used to collect it. In the data discussed here, the Arizona data are completely shelter-based and come from a one-day count on January 18, 1995 by service providers. The Minnesota data (not displayed) are completely shelter-based and come from a one-day interview survey conducted by volunteers. The Michigan data are almost entirely shelter-based, and come from interviews administered by service providers over an unspecified period during February through April 1994. The Kentucky data come from many service agencies and also from searches of outdoor locations; were collected by interviews conducted by providers from July 19 through September 10, 1993; and have been adjusted to control for duplications across agencies and locations by using unique identifiers based on questionnaire responses.

As Exhibit 2 shows, only 6 percent of the shelter beds in Arizona are located outside of the three main urban counties — i.e., in balance-of-state counties — although 21 percent of the state's population lives in these mainly non-urban counties. The proportions of the state's sheltered homeless and of sheltered families and singles found in the balance of state are very close to this 6 percent, as the number of shelter beds controls the number of people who can be sheltered. However, Arizona provider estimates of the total number of homeless people in their area suggest that this distribution of shelter beds does not reflect the true distribution of homelessness. Estimates of the homeless population actually living in balance-of-state counties range from 12 to 18 percent. It is unclear what definitions of homelessness were used to make these estimates, or if all of the data contributing to the estimates used the same definition of homelessness. Other differences of some note were that rural providers cited alcohol or drug abuse as a causal factor in only 12 percent of cases, compared to 29 percent for the two largest urban counties; and rural providers cited domestic violence as a causal factor in 34 percent of cases compared to 14 percent for providers in the two largest urban counties.[9]

Exhibit 3, below, shows Kentucky data on people found homeless, by county, in the three urban counties and in the balance-of-state in the summer of 1993. The rate for rural persons found homeless, 12.9 per 10,000 population, is significantly lower than the Kentucky urban rate of 24.5 per 10,000, but is still quite high. Kentucky does not report its data in a way that makes it possible to create a graph of multiple homeless characteristics. The report does, however, note that the rural homeless people surveyed are more often female, married, members of homeless families, homeless for the first time, and living temporarily in conventional housing with relatives or friends.[10]

Exhibit 3: Homelessness in Kentucky, Summer 1993

Rural vs. Urban Rates, Compared with Census S-Night Data
(Rates per 10,000 population)

	Kentucky Housing Corporation Survey		**Census S-Night**
	Number	Rate	Rate
Louisville / Jefferson Co.	1,166	17.5	*
Lexington / Fayette Co.	755	33.5	*
Covington / Kenton Co.	364	84.1	*
Three-Area Total (Urban)	2,285	24.5	17.5
Urban omitting Louisville	1,119	41.7	*
Balance of State (Rural)	3,433	12.9	1.2
State Total	5,718	15.5	4.0

*not calculated

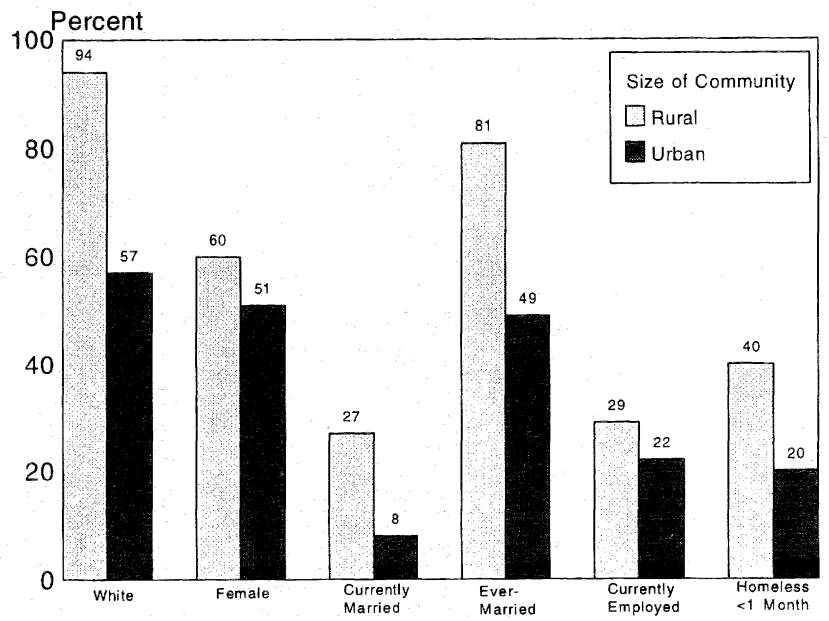
[9] Arizona State Homeless Coordination Office 1995, op. cit.

[10] Kentucky Housing Corporation 1993, op. cit.

Michigan, using a predominantly shelter-based methodology, reports differences between its three northern (rural) zones encompassing almost half of the state's territory, and two southeastern zones (including Detroit) which are most heavily urban. Rural data come from 67 interviews with homeless persons, and are compared to data from 417 interviews with urban homeless persons. Exhibit 4, below, shows that the Michigan data tell the same story as the Census data. Rural homeless adults, compared to their urban counterparts, are more likely to be female (60 vs. 51 percent), white (94 vs. 57 percent), currently married (27 vs. 8 percent), previously married (81 vs. 49 percent), currently working (29 vs. 20 percent), and only recently homeless (homeless for less than one month, 40 vs. 20 percent).[11]

Exhibit 4: Michigan Homeless Population Data, Spring 1994

Zones 1-3 (Rural) vs. Zones 6-7 (Urban)



One of the consistently mentioned characteristics of the rural homeless population that differentiates it from its urban counterpart is the presence of two-parent families with children. For instance, First and Toomey's data for rural Ohio found 480 children with the 1,100 adults they interviewed. This ratio of approximately one child for every 2.3 adults (30 percent) is much higher than the corresponding ratio of one child for every 5.6 adults (15 percent) found in urban settings.[12]

Louisa Stark's data from a state forest campground in Arizona are even more telling. She researched the living situations of about 350 people in 88 campsites near Apache Junction. None had a usual home elsewhere. These were overwhelmingly two-parent

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[11] Michigan Interagency Committee on Homelessness 1995, op. cit.

[12] M. R. Burt and B. E. Cohen, *America's Homeless: Numbers, Characteristics, and the Programs that Serve Them*, Urban Institute Press, Washington DC, 1989.

families with children; the men worked or looked for work, as did some of the women. Most had reasonably stable work histories. None used any services, homeless-specific or otherwise, and saw it as their own responsibility to get themselves out of their present situation. It is unclear how they will be able to do this, however, or whether they will ever be able to own their own homes despite their hopes of being able to do so once their economic situation stabilizes.[13]

Rural subgroups

In addition to rural-urban differences in demographic characteristics, RECD's conferences raised awareness of some groups among the rural homeless population who have no counterpart in most urban areas of the country. The two biggest groups are Native Americans and migrant workers.[14] Except in a few cities with major populations of Native Americans (e.g., Minneapolis, Phoenix, Seattle), homelessness among Native Americans is largely a rural phenomenon, both on and off reservations. The same is true for migrant workers during periods when they are not housed by companies for whom they harvest crops, and sometimes even when they are. The need to provide services for homeless migrants was emphasized in all four RECD conferences (as discussed below), and concerns related to serving Native Americans were brought to the attention of participants in all but the Ohio conference, which focused on the special needs of homeless people in Appalachia.

Rural homelessness is also affected by significant migration of people to and through rural areas who are not migrant workers in the usual sense of that term. At the RECD conferences, the following situations were described as occurring in every part of the country. In virtually all instances, the people involved are rural in their origins and/or recent experience, in addition to experiencing homelessness in a rural place:

- People return to a rural area after living in a city, either because they lost a job or because their hopes of securing work in an urban area failed and they exhausted their resources. Upon returning home, they rely on family and friends for as long as possible, but often cannot find or afford housing.

- People converge on a rural area that has new job opportunities (e.g., a new manufacturing plant), looking for work. The number of people arriving is far greater than the number of jobs available, and there are insufficient housing resources to cope with the influx.

- People without a usual home elsewhere are on the road, looking for work or just going from one place to another, when their car breaks down, stranding them in a rural area without resources; or they stop wherever they happen to be when they run out of resources. Rural homeless advocates sometimes characterize this as "off the interstate" homelessness.

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[13] L. Stark, Presentation at RECD Conference, op. cit.

[14] These two populations are discussed at greater length in a following section that focuses on issues in serving these and other special populations.

- Rural people who have become homeless may be sent to cities in order to receive services, but may be afraid of cities and may not have the skills to survive on the streets. They return to rural areas, where the surroundings are familiar and where they feel they have more control over their lives.

- Rural people living at the margins of expanding urban centers are displaced by increases in taxes and other living costs, changing employment criteria (e.g., declining demand for workers with limited skills), increased housing costs and limited availability of low-cost housing (exacerbated by the closing of many trailer parks in areas undergoing development).

Note that in all of these situations, persistent poverty — a core characteristic of many rural areas — plays an important part in creating or exacerbating homelessness. People who are chronically without resources, in the form of savings or employment at greater than minimum-wage levels, are especially vulnerable to economic setbacks and never far from the specter of homelessness.

Rural/urban similarities

In addition to the differences noted, there are some striking similarities between rural and urban homelessness. Very large "doubled up" populations in both environments are in desperate enough straits to provide a steady flow of new homeless people to replace each person who is assisted back into housing. In the study done by the Kentucky Housing Corporation, 245 people were in shelters in 117 non-urban Kentucky counties on the first day of the study. By the end of the study, two months later, an additional 193 people had received shelter services in these counties. Extrapolating to an entire year, roughly five times as many rural Kentuckians used shelter services as would be sheltered on any given night. This is only slightly lower than the six-to-one ratio found for Philadelphia shelters and higher than the three-to-one ratio found for New York City shelters.[15]

Disabilities and personal problems — including drug and alcohol addiction, mental illness, domestic violence, and physical disabilities — are often encountered among both rural and urban homeless people. For instance, a study of rural Yolo County, California found that 40 percent of the homeless sample met the criteria for a diagnosis of major mental illness, and 82 and 40 percent, respectively, met the criteria for diagnoses of lifetime alcohol or drug abuse.[16] These rates are comparable to those found among homeless people in the urban and suburban counties included in the same study.[17]

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[15] D. P. Culhane et al., "Public Shelter Admission Rates in Philadelphia and New York City: The Implications of Turnover for Sheltered Population Counts," *Housing Policy Debate, 5(2)*, 107-140, 1994.

[16] G. Vernez et al., op. cit.

[17] Equivalent rates for urban (Alameda) and suburban (Orange) counties are, respectively: major mental illness, 33 and 26 percent; lifetime alcohol abuse, 66 and 45 percent; lifetime drug abuse, 60 and 38 percent.

Types of rural communities experiencing homelessness

In urban settings, the conditions that generate homelessness may vary from one city to another.[18] This is true also of rural areas; rural communities with quite different characteristics may produce homelessness. From their study of 21 rural counties representative of rural Ohio, First and Toomey identify three different types of counties that seem to generate relatively high levels of homelessness.[19] They are:

- Counties experiencing economic growth;
- Counties whose economies depend on declining extractive industries (mining, lumbering) located in long-standing pockets of poverty; and
- Primarily agricultural counties.

Rural counties experiencing economic growth may be counties with a new or expanding industrial plant, counties on the urban fringe to which businesses and higher-income people are moving, or counties attracting recreational developments such as resorts and second homes. The first situation tends to attract far more job-seekers than there are jobs; many of these people may end up with no place to live. The second and third situations drive up taxes and expenses for local people, sometimes pricing them out of localities where their families have lived for generations. Long-term pockets of poverty such as the Ohio counties bordering Appalachia tend to export the young and able-bodied to urban areas where they look for and find work. Some years later, after losing work and being unable to find another job, they return home, only to find themselves without a home. In addition, local people in these counties and in primarily agricultural counties may face loss of livelihood due to changing economic conditions, such as the declining need for farm labor brought about by mechanized and corporate farming and a shrinking service sector as these counties lose population.

Rural advantages and disadvantages

It may seem implausible that there could be any "advantage" in being homeless anywhere. However, for many people who have experienced homelessness, rural is better by definition. Aside from the fact that the basic costs of surviving are likely to be lower — and the pace of life slower, more manageable, and less threatening — it is also true that in many small towns the word "community" still has meaning: people are more likely to know each other and to try to look out for each other. Although rural individuals and families who are down on their luck may be reluctant to ask for assistance, when their resources are truly exhausted someone is likely to be there: with food, a small loan or a temporary job, medical attention or the offer of temporary shelter. As a rule, there are fewer strangers in rural America.

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[18] M. R. Burt, *Over the Edge: The Growth of Homelessness in the 1980s*, Russell Sage Foundation and Urban Institute Press, New York and Washington DC, 1992; R. Benjamin, "Inter-city Homeless Rates and Housing and Social Indicators," *Housing Policy Debate*, forthcoming.

[19] First, Toomey, Rife and Stasny, op. cit.

However, there may be also be fewer opportunities to make the difficult transition from homelessness to having and keeping a home and making ends meet. Because shelters are relatively rare in rural areas, people who are homeless are less likely to encounter service providers who are prepared and equipped to provide continuing, structured support and assistance. Social service agencies, usually located in county seats and other population centers, are often too poorly funded to provide active outreach in remote areas. Employment opportunities, even when available, are likely to be low-wage, unstable, and without benefits; people without fixed addresses or telephones are, of course, at an added disadvantage in making themselves wanted by or readily available to would-be employers. Moreover, fundamental shifts in the rural economy — away from agriculture, timber, and mining, and toward information-processing, services, and other higher-skill jobs — work to the disadvantage of those who are already severely disadvantaged, as is true by definition of many if not most homeless people.

Rural homelessness, in short, is not some temporary phenomenon: it is widespread, it is here to stay — and it can be expected to grow worse, given that rural areas and the nation as a whole are struggling with many unmet economic, social and racial challenges at a time when the public resources available to address such needs are being curtailed. On the other hand, generalizations about the state of the rural homeless population inevitably obscure the fact that many of those who are without homes still have the vital resource that rural Americans have always had in abundance: a strong work ethic. Given a reasonable opportunity to break out of the cycle of poverty and homelessness, most rural people will respond. The challenge, accordingly, is to find better ways to help. Moreover, given the difficulty of addressing the range of problems associated with homelessness, there is a paramount need to develop more effective intervention strategies — in order to prevent homelessness before it occurs.

II. What We've Done, and Why

Congress instructed the Department of Agriculture's Rural Economic and Community Development (RECD) administration to include issues of rural homelessness within its mandate, and to pursue approaches to addressing the problems of the rural homeless. RECD has subsequently undertaken a number of measures to identify and assess the scope of rural homelessness and the ways in which RECD may be able to help alleviate the problem.

As part of its mandate, RECD sponsored four regional conferences on rural homelessness during the spring of 1995. Joining RECD in sponsoring this major undertaking were a number of national partners: the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) / Salvation Army, the Center for Mental Health Services of the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Interagency Council on the Homeless. In addition, local partners co-sponsored each regional conference. The South Carolina Department of Mental Health co-sponsored the first regional conference in Columbia, South Carolina. The Oregon Shelter Network, an affiliate of the National Coalition for the Homeless, co-sponsored the second conference in Hood River, Oregon. The Community Action Human Resources Agency co-sponsored the third conference in Casa Grande, Arizona. The Coalition on

Housing and Homelessness in Ohio, a member of the National Coalition for the Homeless, co-sponsored the final conference in Columbus, Ohio. National and local partners provided speakers and conference leaders and helped make conference arrangements.

More than 700 participants, from every state and Puerto Rico, attended these conferences. They were asked to share with representatives of the federal government what they know about rural homelessness, about services and networking to serve rural homeless people, and about what programs seem to work for themselves and their communities. Finally, they offered recommendations for policies that would further benefit homeless people in rural America.

RECD and its partners had several goals in sponsoring these conferences. The first was simply to hear about the salient characteristics of rural homelessness from those who know the problems best: people who have experienced homelessness and those who are trying to help them. The second was to learn how federal programs are or are not being used to meet needs, and to identify barriers to their use. The third was to try to develop an understanding about how RECD programs and initiatives, in particular, could be structured to fill gaps in the network of available services, and how RECD field associates could begin to work constructively with local agencies on homeless issues. And the fourth was to learn how best to overcome problems of funding, geography, and definitional issues in order to create and sustain a climate of active, effective cooperation among advocates and policymakers at all levels.

The power of personal experience

At the RECD conferences, the panels featuring first-hand accounts of homeless and formerly homeless people reflected virtually all of the problems of homelessness. Here we present a representative sample of personal stories in very abbreviated form:

- *A man at the Ohio conference described his situation as arising mainly from economic circumstances. He is a middle-aged man who, having worked at the same plant for years, was injured on the job. He lost both his job and his health insurance but still had major medical expenses. Because of his debts, he lost his house.*

- *A woman at the Ohio conference had traveled the country for several years with her husband and two children, living in their car and looking for employment. They worked sporadically, and also used shelter services on occasion. Although their main problem was inability to find steady work, complications included underlying problems of alcohol and drug abuse (by both adults) as well as wife battering.*

- *Two Vietnam veterans at the South Carolina conference related their experiences, which were echoed at other conferences. After being discharged from military service, they returned home and tried to resume their lives. Work and marriage were ultimately overwhelmed by alcohol abuse, which both men used to blot out the symptoms of service-related post-traumatic stress disorder. Both spent years living in the woods, surviving as best they could, until they entered rehabilitation programs offered by the Department of Veterans Affairs.*

- *A woman at the Oregon conference told of moving from northern California to southern Oregon with several members of her extended family, in an effort to find work. In Oregon, both her husband and her mother died, and the woman moved with her children into her sister's house. She herself did not drink, but when her sister drank too much, which was often, she beat the woman and her children, who left and sought help at a family shelter.*

- *A young woman in South Carolina told of being "raised right" by her grandparents in a rural area of the state, but she was "stubborn" and "needed to make my own mistakes." In her middle teens she started abusing alcohol and drugs, including crack. While homeless and still abusing drugs, she had two children; the second pregnancy influenced her to seek help. She is now in an employment training program.*

- *A woman at the Ohio conference had been abandoned to the streets by her mother when she was a teenager. She had been homeless and on the road for 17 years, sometimes with a companion and sometimes not.*

These first-person accounts — along with others heard at RECD's conferences — powerfully underscored the fact that rural homelessness is a problem with many faces. Some of the rural people who find themselves without homes are only temporarily disadvantaged and, with help and a few breaks, could regain self-sufficiency. Others may have been homeless for long periods of time but remain resourceful and able to take advantage of targeted, sustained assistance. And others, while obviously in need of such assistance, still might never move far from the margins of homelessness.

III. What We've Learned

DEFINITIONAL ISSUES

How homelessness is *defined* has a direct bearing on whether the problem is adequately acknowledged, on whether resources are available to address it, and on whether those resources will reach those who need them. Significant definitional issues arose at all four RECD conferences, and at the final RECD conference in Columbus, Ohio, several sessions were devoted specifically to such issues.

Although there are many possible ways to define homelessness, both urban and rural, the major focus of these sessions was on two definitions embedded in federal legislation and practice — the McKinney Act definition, and HUD's interpretation of "literally homeless."

In relevant part, the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act defines homeless persons as those "...who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence." HUD limits assistance to the "literally homeless," defining them as those who are sleeping in a homeless shelter or sheltering arrangement (including vouchers

for hotels or motels, transitional housing, youth shelters, and battered women's shelters), and those who are sleeping in "places not meant for human habitation."

As a practical matter, HUD's definition defines people by where they are rather than by what their problems may be. The critical difficulty with HUD's definition in rural areas is the general lack of any formal shelter structures or even vouchering arrangements. Thus many of the rural people receiving, or in need of, assistance for homelessness are not covered by the HUD definition. Persons sleeping in conventional dwelling units, even if they have no stability and no guarantee that they will be welcome tomorrow, are not considered literally homeless by this definition.

Conference discussions addressed whether these definitions are adequate to cover the needs of rural homeless people or pose unnecessary barriers to homeless people who are seeking services — in essence, whether rural homelessness is so different from its urban counterpart that an expanded, changed, or alternative definition is necessary.

Several themes which were heard at all four conferences revealed a variety of thinking about the ramifications of homelessness definitions:

- The McKinney Act definition may be adequate in principle, but HUD's interpretation makes it inadequate in practice;

- There is a need for an "ideal," flexible approach to helping people that would eliminate the need for a constraining definition at all; and

- In practice, the scarcity of resources drives the way the definitions are used.

Many conference participants stated that they had no problem with the McKinney Act definition of homelessness; they saw it as broad enough to encompass the types of homelessness that they encountered in their rural settings.[20] They did, however, have significant problems with the ways in which the definition is usually interpreted by funders and service providers. In general, these problems involved the common use by agencies of a narrower definition, usually HUD's definition of the "literally homeless," to exclude many people who are seeking assistance.

Sometimes these exclusionary practices have been applied in situations where a homeless advocate was trying to *prevent* homelessness, e.g., a family who apply for help, knowing that they are going to lose their housing, and are turned down because they are not yet homeless. At other times the denial of services amounts to a "Catch 22." For example, a family sleeping in their car, and therefore literally homeless, applies for assistance. The assistance takes a few days to process, and in the meantime the homeless advocate arranges for the family to sleep in a relative's living room. When the family returns to receive the assistance, they are turned down because they are now not "literally homeless." Other limiting rules mentioned at the conferences are requirements that the homeless person be in a shelter before aid will be provided, or, even more limiting, that the person have utilized every step in the available continuum of care (assessment, emergency, and transitional shelter) before permanent assistance will be provided. Conference participants argued that this is wasteful, since many homeless persons do not need this level of sheltering, and misleading, since the scarcity

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[20] Others, however, suggested that the Act's definition could be improved by modifying it to read "who lack a fixed, regular, *or* [rather than *and*] adequate nighttime residence."

of formal homeless services in rural areas means that most homeless people will not be able to avail themselves of such services even when they need and qualify for them.

Toward an 'ideal' definition

Repeatedly, conference participants stressed that the "literally homeless" definition developed in connection with urban experience does not work for rural areas. In urban areas, those who are "literally homeless" are, for the most part, readily recognizable, because they are found sleeping on the streets, in parks, or in shelters. Shelters are rare in rural areas, and people who are homeless can virtually disappear in forested areas and public lands. Therefore, if HUD's definition of the "literally homeless" is *applied* literally, it may appear that there are very few homeless people in rural areas — that is, people who can be readily found and counted. They may be camping out, or living in a barn or in an abandoned trailer or school bus with no sanitation facilities, parked in an out-of-the-way field. Or, using the still-intact family and social network structure that remains in most rural areas, they may rely on the resources of their extended family, however limited these resources might be. Nevertheless, many people in rural areas approach rural agencies for assistance with situations that can accurately be characterized as "having no place to stay."

Many conference participants expressed a strong preference for eliminating a restrictive definition of homelessness altogether, and replacing it with the goal of developing the capacity to help people living in extreme poverty with whatever needs they have, including housing resources. Participants spoke about the stigma attached to the concept of homelessness — how it limits people's willingness to ask for help even when their situation is dire, and how it limits the willingness of other people to provide the help that is needed. Stereotypical images of urban homelessness — the street derelict, the unkempt mentally ill person — are part of the rural as well as the urban consciousness. Not wanting to associate themselves with that stigma, many rural people forego aid; at the same time, not seeing that image on their own streets, many other rural people deny that homelessness even exists in their community.

What appears to be more acceptable — and accurate — is the concept of "people who have fallen on hard times," or "people who don't have any place to stay." Significantly, these were the phrases that First and Toomey had to adopt, in their study of homelessness in rural Ohio, in order to get referrals to homeless people for their interviews.[21] And these were the phrases encountered in the Kentucky study at some shelters where workers denied that they served the homeless and instead described themselves as operating programs "for people who have no other place to go."[22] From the perspective of both the homeless person contemplating whether to seek assistance and the community resident deciding whether to support such assistance, the use of different and less stigmatizing terms may be helpful, even necessary.

To the extent that rural homelessness encompasses a range of circumstances that may not, at any given moment, meet the strict definition of literal homelessness, rural homelessness poses a challenge that calls for scrutiny in urban areas as well. It is likely, notwithstanding the fact that it may be easier to find people who meet the definition of literal homelessness in urban than in rural areas, that urban areas contain significant

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[21] First, Toomey, Rife and Stasny, op. cit.

[22] Kentucky Housing Corporation, op. cit.

numbers of people who fit the expanded definitions proposed by rural advocates. For example, people in urban areas who are squatting or simply sleeping in abandoned buildings, or living in shack or tent cities, or staying a few nights each on the couches of different relatives or friends, are all in situations similar to those of rural people who have been excluded from the "literally homeless" definition.

An "ideal" definition of homelessness, then, would be flexible enough to cover a range of circumstances captured by the concept of being without a place to call home, and to provide for support along a continuum of need — from unemployment counseling and assistance with health care to temporary housing to participation in a self-help or other subsidized housing program. One of the major benefits of such a definitional shift would be to emphasize and encourage homelessness prevention — i.e., active intervention and case management when homelessness is the next step.

The impact of scarce resources on definitions

Participants at all of the RECD conferences recognized that an absolute scarcity of resources drives agencies to use restrictive definitions. When an agency lacks the funds to serve more than a small fraction of the need in its community, it has to do something to control the number of requests it will honor. The easiest way to do that is to restrict eligibility by redefining it. In the case of traditional mainstream agencies — i.e., those serving a spectrum of needs, primarily among low-income individuals and families — there is a natural tendency to resist expanding their responsibilities to include homeless people. Since scarcity of resources is the rule among all service agencies, urban as well as rural, and since this situation is likely to worsen in the coming years, few conference participants held out much hope for seeing an "ideal" definition of homelessness adopted at any time in the near future. However, they still wanted to be on record as believing that it would be a better — more humane as well as more workable — approach than the definitions presently used.

SPECIAL TOPICS

Each of the four RECD conferences featured workshops on selected special topics considered critical to understanding rural homelessness. The topics were: networking and coalition-building, prevention, housing, and special populations/rural services. Workshop leaders were supplied by the local sponsors of each conference and by the Center for Mental Health Services of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Federal Emergency Management Administration, the Housing Assistance Council, the Interagency Council on the Homeless, and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Networking and coalition-building

All of the RECD conferences included panels and workshops in which participants described the nature of their service networks and the successes and difficulties they have had in serving homeless people. Basic themes emerged in all of the conferences:

- The process of getting services to rural homeless people tends to be informal and personal rather than formal and bureaucratic;

- Because of factors such as isolation, geographical distance, lack of resources, local attitudes and politics (including denial of the problem), and simple unawareness of what has worked elsewhere, rural service providers may have a difficult time organizing an efficient service network to help homeless individuals and families; and

- There are both advantages and disadvantages in relying on mainstream agencies rather than on homeless-specific services.

• *Service delivery is personal:* In rural communities, when someone needs help the response tends to be personal and informal, even when a service agency is involved. Conference participants repeatedly pointed out that in all likelihood the people asking for help and the people trying to provide it will have known each other all their lives. In addition, the service providers have long histories of referring back and forth to staff in other agencies whom, again, they have known all their lives. Agency staff tend to know which agencies have resources at the moment, and what types of resources they have. Linkages are also informal to churches and other unofficial sources of assistance.

As a consequence, service delivery in rural areas tends to have a different flavor than in urban areas; at the RECD conferences, rural providers from all over the country usually expressed this as "we do what we can." The reality of this approach from a homeless person's perspective is reflected in the frequent comments by homeless and formerly homeless conference participants that "the smaller the town, the better the treatment and the more help you get." Repeatedly, conference participants stressed that the advantages of this small-town service delivery attitude are great, and that everything possible should be done to retain this advantage when making efforts to enhance rural service delivery capacity.

• *Isolation is a major problem:* Although many conference participants praised rural approaches to serving homeless people, they also described problems of isolation, including a chronic lack of knowledge of how different communities have addressed some of the problems of rural homelessness and a tendency to reinvent the wheel. They spoke of the difficulty of communicating and interacting beyond one's immediate locality; of the absence of fax machines, internet linkages, and electronic databases; of roads that rarely take you where you need to go; of the complete lack of any public transportation system and the difficulties of depending totally on cars; of the time involved in getting from place to place; and of the impact of natural barriers — the mountains and rivers that cut people and agencies off from each other.

Because of this geographical isolation, organizing services takes more time than might be the case in a city. It is hard to hold a meeting when it may take days even to notify participants through the mail of potential meeting dates, and when participants have to take a whole day off from work to travel to and from the meeting. If anyone were investing in developing the service capacity of rural communities, the evidence from these conferences suggests that donating fax machines and computers to facilitate internet linkages would be an exceptionally cost-effective way to begin.

• *Outreach is crucial:* Participants also talked about how concepts of "the community" are often smaller than an agency's functional jurisdiction, so that someone "up-county" might not think of going to a service "down-county" as receiving services within their

own community, even if the agency is meant to serve the whole county. Thus "outreach" takes on an entirely different meaning and magnitude of importance in rural areas. Outreach becomes literally the "front door" of the agency, providing access to services for people who will never be able to walk through the physical front door of the agency. To the extent that rural service agencies have funds to cover the necessarily costly staff and transportation expenses of outreach, they will reach and serve far more of the needy people within the agency's purview. Lacking such funds, they will not be able to identify let alone meet the service needs of the far-flung and isolated.

• *Denial of the problem is a challenge:* Rural advocates and service providers trying to help homeless people often encounter an attitudinal problem that is largely a thing of the past in urban areas — the belief that "we have no homeless here." And even when the presence of homeless people in the community has been persuasively documented, a corollary belief must be dealt with: that "they're not ours" — if there are homeless people around here, they must have come from somewhere else.

Homeless people themselves in rural areas may share these attitudes about homelessness, and feel shame about their circumstances. Often, they come from a tradition of taking care of themselves, and feel they should continue to do so. Their situation is made more difficult by the visibility of service use in rural areas — if you go into a service agency or use a shelter, "everyone will know." This visibility keeps many rural people from asking for help, even though they are in great need.

In addition, local politics — the attitudes of particularly influential people and the history of interactions among agencies and other interested parties — may play a greater role in rural than in urban areas in promoting or retarding service development. Ideology, too, plays a part: there is probably more strong anti-government or pro-rugged-individualist bias in rural than in urban areas.

• *Mainstream versus homeless-specific services:* In most of the rural communities represented at the RECD conferences, services for homeless people are the responsibility of mainstream service agencies such as welfare offices, community action agencies, public housing authorities, and even police and mental health departments, primarily because *there isn't anything else.* Homeless dollars such as FEMA funds are distributed to and through these agencies, not via homeless-specific services. Community action agencies may run the shelter if there is one, and welfare offices or community action agencies may provide hotel or motel vouchers in the absence of a shelter.[23]

There was much discussion among conference participants of the pros and cons of contrasting service models: mainstream, broad-spectrum service networks versus homeless-specific services. Some rural communities have become proficient at serving

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[23] One argument runs that in most rural areas, shelters make little sense, since it is more economical to provide vouchers or other assistance to the occasional individual or family in need than to maintain an actual structure for them. However, countervailing evidence comes from the few shelters that do exist in rural areas: they appear to be consistently full and forced to turn people away. For example, one 60-bed shelter in downstate Indiana, operated by a community action agency, reports that it is always full and has to turn away 30-40 people every night. On the one hand, it is the only shelter in a 13-county rural area, and if there were more, the demand for this one might not be as great. On the other hand, an effort to document needs in this area found that at least 3,000 homeless people sought help from various area agencies during the course of a year. As a *rate* (service-seekers per total population), this is an indicator of need comparable to that found in many urban areas with developed homeless services networks.

homeless people by networking mainstream agencies. This is exactly what is called for by Congress in requiring the use of "all available resources" in every piece of legislation funding local services. Hence some rural communities, far from being *backward* in their homeless service delivery because they lack homeless-specific services, could serve as *models* for urban areas that usually find it extremely difficult to access mainstream services for homeless people.

However, there are both advantages and disadvantages in relying on mainstream agencies. One advantage is that services for homeless people are not isolated; by networking and using all available resources, rural service providers may be better able to ensure that the multiple needs of their clients are addressed than might be the case in urban areas where homeless-specific services may be greater but more isolated.

On the other hand, resources available in rural areas, even when fully deployed, fall far short of meeting the need. And in many rural areas there may not *be* any service for some needs, such as drug abuse; even access to basic health care may be a long distance away. Moreover, homeless people will always be competing with many other demands for the same funding sources, and providers will be spread too thin in terms of covering too many needs and too many people. Under these circumstances, many rural homeless advocates fear that meeting the needs of homeless people will not rank as a high priority for mainstream agencies.

A major issue for rural areas is whether to capitalize on this level of integration of homeless services by trying to create an overall community safety net, or whether to try to specialize. In reality, a judicious blend of both will probably be the answer. Some rural areas are probably far ahead of the curve on using mainstream services. In all probability, any homeless-specific services in the form of a shelter or earmarked permanent supported housing for disabled homeless people will be developed and supervised by a mainstream agency (e.g., a community action or mental health agency), and thus will retain the advantages of both specialization and linkage to mainstream services. State RECD offices could play an important part in making housing resources available to local communities in conjunction with a development plan that includes serving homeless people. If, in the future, RECD receives some specific homeless funding to accompany its rural homeless mandate, it could become more influential in helping to shape the development of rural services for people experiencing housing distress.

• *Parallels with other rural service systems:* It should be noted that these problems of service structure, service delivery, and service coordination are not in any way unique to rural services targeted specifically to the homeless population. Other rural service sectors experience identical problems and face identical struggles with definitions and service models that have evolved from urban experience. Recently the Center for Mental Health Services conducted a public forum on rural mental health needs and services.[24] The picture that emerged for mental health was virtually identical to the findings of the RECD conferences on homelessness with regard to: the frequency and severity of need among the population (high); the relevance of urban models (unsuitable); the accessibility of services (inaccessible due to lack of transportation and

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[24] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, Center for Mental Health Services, "Taking Rural Into Account: Report on the National Public Forum Co-sponsored by the Center for Mental Health Services," Rockville, MD, 1993.

financial resources); the availability of services (scarce); and the organization of services (fragmented, not usually organized or integrated, too much reinventing the wheel).

Preventing homelessness: short-term obstacles, long-term goals

RECD conference participants unanimously expressed a strong preference for being able to prevent homelessness when it was obvious that homelessness was the next step for someone asking for help and, equally unanimously, expressed frustration at the almost complete lack of resources for either immediate or long-term preventive efforts.

The difficulties involved in accessing resources have already been discussed. With specific regard to services, funds for emergency preventive efforts such as preventing eviction or foreclosure are extremely scarce in rural areas. The primary federal funding source for preventive assistance, the Emergency Food and Shelter Program operated through FEMA, actually distributes a higher proportion of its resources to rural areas than most other federal programs, but it is not a homeless program *per se,* and in any case the funds available are far too small to meet the need. Community action agencies can also use their resources for prevention, but are similarly constrained by lack of funds to meet the need.

Workshop participants discussed the need for long-term preventive solutions, such as improving the supply of adequate, affordable rural housing, retraining of rural workers, and economic development to supply jobs that pay enough to cover the costs of housing. Many of these recommendations are consistent with the mandate of RECD, which could play a major role in structuring its housing and economic development programs with an eye to the long-term prevention of rural homelessness.

When affordable housing is beyond reach — or doesn't exist

Rural areas differ in the nature of their housing difficulties and the contribution of these difficulties to rural homelessness. Workshop participants discussed a variety of circumstances related to housing. In some rural areas, such as those in proximity to expanding urban areas or those in demand for second homes and resorts, affordability is the primary problem. In these areas, land is rapidly being removed from farming, general countryside uses, and small-town businesses, and is being converted in various ways: to businesses requiring workers with more sophisticated skills, to expensive ex-urban housing stock, to vacation homes, and even to relatively less expensive townhouses and small homes for those who cannot afford city prices. As these changes occur, land values and taxes rise, the types of jobs once held by rural people disappear, and the original residents are left unable to compete or to afford housing in the newly changed environment. For those on the lower rungs of the economic ladder, often the only affordable housing is substandard.

However, in other rural areas the issue is simply the absence of vacant or available affordable housing. When new businesses locate in rural areas or existing businesses expand, they often attract more job-seekers than the local housing stock can absorb. In some small towns and rural areas, there is, quite literally, no vacant place to stay. Trailer parks may spring up, or families with RVs may camp in official campgrounds or just drive off into the woods, staying there — usually without plumbing or electricity — until the authorities force them to move on. The nearest motel may be 100 or more miles away. Even the people who get the new jobs may not have a place to stay.

Finally — and perhaps most importantly — in many rural areas significant proportions of the existing housing stock is substandard, despite overall improvements in recent years. Rural service providers who routinely encounter three or four families living in a four-room house without plumbing and with holes in the floors and walls spoke at the RECD workshops and maintained that at least some of these families should clearly be considered homeless. (As noted previously, they might meet the existing statutory criteria of the McKinney Act, but they would not meet HUD's "literally homeless" definition.)

Special populations

• *Veterans:* Some sources suggest that veterans may account for as much as a third of the rural homeless population. At the four RECD conferences, staff of the Department of Veterans Affairs, a conference co-sponsor, led workshops on the particular needs of rural homeless veterans.

Several Vietnam veterans shared their personal stories during these conferences. Common to many of the stories were: the presence and influence of severe and long-lasting symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) associated with combat experiences; heavy use of alcohol and sometimes other drugs over periods of years; "losing everything," including jobs, spouses, children, and houses, as PTSD symptoms and substance abuse worsen; and, finally, the veterans' preference for isolation and self-reliance in the woods and their ability to maintain themselves at a survival level without assistance.

The services and income support available to veterans through the programs of the Department of Veterans Affairs were critical in helping veterans leave homelessness, according to the participants at these workshops. Rehabilitation services, especially for substance abuse and PTSD, were essential first steps. Another common experience was the importance of the moral support and comradeship offered by other veterans who had gone through the same process of disintegration and homelessness and were also in the process of recovery. The financial resources available through service-connected disability payments provided the money to re-enter housing. Job training services offered opportunities to become partially or completely self-sufficient. This array of services and connection to people who understand veterans' situations and orientation can be a tremendous resource; often it offers more than can be assembled, from other services, for non-veterans, in urban as well as in rural areas.[25]

• *Native Americans:* At the RECD conferences, homelessness among Native Americans was discussed as an issue requiring unique skills and resources to address. Most of the discussion about Native American homelessness at the RECD conferences focused on off-reservation situations, since these are the situations that service providers in rural America face most often.

Meeting the needs of Native Americans who are homeless is complicated by language issues, trust and culture issues, and by the necessity to work with many different tribal governments. A single service provider may work with people from many different tribes, and have to deal with several native languages and varying levels of English proficiency. Native people often will find it hard to trust service providers

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[25] See, for example, M. Tidwell, *In the Shadow of the White House*, Prima Publications, NY, 1992.

who are not themselves Native Americans, and mainstream agency personnel may have little or no idea of the different native cultures or expectations for interpersonal behavior. This makes gaining the trust of potential clients even harder. When service providers try to reconnect clients to family and friends, or to identify resources in a person's home community that could help, they often find themselves dealing with officials from different tribes, with different procedures and priorities. Thus what would normally be a complicated process of helping clients rebuild their lives becomes even more complex. Moreover, many service agency personnel at the RECD conferences mentioned the difficulties of doing follow-up work with clients if service begins off-reservation and the client then moves back to live on a reservation. (They also noted that on-reservation housing problems, though beyond the purview of these conferences, are in many cases as bad as or worse than those encountered off-reservation.)

• *Migrant Workers:* Homeless migrant workers are a special population that is unique to rural areas. For example, in Yolo County in California's Central Valley, unemployed migrant workers account for a significant part of the homeless population.[26] Migrants are present in all parts of the country, and their situation and periodic homelessness was discussed in workshops at each RECD conference. Homelessneness among migrant workers poses several different problems, all of which strain local resources.

The first type of problem arises when the picking season ends and some of the workers stay on in the vicinity of their last employment. While they may have been housed (albeit badly) while working, they have no permanent place to stay and become homeless after employment ends. Local services are then often asked to help them find housing; and they may seek help from other emergency services.

The second type of problem arises when employers fail to provide housing. With some exceptions, employers of migrant workers are not required to supply housing, and RECD workshop participants in all four regions reported employers are increasingly likely to leave migrant workers to their own resources — which means that they are employed but homeless. Often their solution to this situation is to camp out, either in formal campgrounds or just in out-of-the-way places, but in some cases they may also seek help from local shelter resources.

A third type of problem arises when migrant workers seek to settle permanently in a location that they can use as a base from which to travel to work sites within reach. An example was given from the state of Washington, where one part or another of the state has crops to pick during most of the year. Migrant workers want to settle in a community, live there when not working, and then travel temporarily to whichever area has work. Some local communities are resisting this influx of "different" people who want to become permanent — although perhaps not permanently employed — residents. In addition, differences in language and culture between the migrants and the local community (including its service providers) can compound the difficulties of helping the migrants.

• *Youth:* Special conference sessions on runaway and homeless youth brought out some of the issues faced by rural providers in trying to help. Rural youth leave home for much the same reasons as urban youth, including serious disagreements with parents or caretakers, parental substance abuse, parental sexual and physical abuse of

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[26] G. Vernez et al., op. cit.

the youth, and being thrown out of the home. Rural service providers tell of clusters or enclaves of youth, trying to depend on themselves and each other in the absence of adult assistance. Sometimes these enclaves occupy abandoned or derelict buildings; sometimes they camp out in formal or informal campsites. As is true of their urban counterparts, they are very hard for agencies to reach and help. In rural areas these difficulties are compounded by the fact that the visibility of such assistance to other members of rural communities may make it particularly difficult to gain the trust of these youth, as they fear the consequences of having their situation and whereabouts become known.

IV. What We Need To Do Next

Future prospects

In the near term, the future of services for homeless people in rural America is likely to be heavily influenced by what happens in Washington, D.C. The block-granting of many programs, including the McKinney Act homeless funds, is a strong possibility. The prospect of block grants and other federal funding shifts prompted mixed reactions among RECD conference participants.

In some states, rural advocates have a serious distrust of state-level distribution mechanisms. They fear, with some historical justification, that rural areas will not see much if any money if state-level policymakers have their way. In addition, they fear that the *specific types* of assistance needed will not find favor — e.g., developers will press for new construction, which may not be what rural areas need.

In addition, concerns were expressed that politics would intervene strictly as a consequence of the amount of money being transferred to states and its structure. For example, in some states, the formula allocation for balance-of-state emergency shelter grants now goes to a housing agency, which tries to distribute it according to need. If there is a homeless block grant, folding the rest of the HUD McKinney funds into the formula allocation, the resulting amount may be enough to attract the attention of the state legislature in determining its distribution.

Further, if the McKinney funds were folded into a larger community housing or development type of block grant, with or without a homeless set-aside, this would virtually assure that state legislatures would get involved in its distribution. The results would probably not be as need-based as are current distribution mechanisms. And, if there is no homeless set-aside within such a block grant, it was the view of many conference participants that homeless services will receive short shrift. There is the additional probability that block grant funds will have to go through the formal state legislative appropriation process, as happened often with the Reagan block grants in the early 1980s. This would further delay and politicize the allocation decisions.

On the other hand, some states are already organized into commissions or task forces with statewide representation to shape statewide allocation decisions for homeless funding (and sometimes for related funding, such as mental health monies). These commissions and task forces hold regular regional meetings, seek feedback about local needs, set priorities, and, sometimes, make the actual allocation decisions. Experience with the Reagan block grants suggests that where state mechanisms are

already in place to handle programs and services newly placed under a block grant, allocations tend to be reasonably compatible with pre-block grant allocations.[27]

However, past experience also indicates that when federal housing or education funds change from being targeted federal allocations to being block granted and given to state legislatures to distribute, it is the central cities that suffer compared to the number of persons in need. The evidence suggests that the greatest beneficiaries of these shifts are suburban jurisdictions, not rural areas, since the distributions tend to be made on a per-capita basis rather than on an estimate of the poverty population or some other indicator of extreme need.

An awareness of these historical precedents may help rural advocates to develop appropriate educational materials for their state legislatures and other state-level decision-makers. Even were the most benign of past funding distribution patterns to repeat themselves, however, there is no assurance that funds will be used to serve homeless people unless there is a set-aside for that purpose.

Next steps

Participants in the four RECD conferences contributed many challenging ideas about the nature of homelessness in rural areas and appropriate ways to address it. Many lessons can be drawn from their testimony; four are highlighted here because of their importance in broadly addressing the needs of homeless rural people.

• Apply definitions of homelessness with greater flexibility

It is not clear, even after these conferences, that a special definition of homelessness is needed for rural areas. What *is* clear is that existing definitions need to be interpreted with greater flexibility. The example was already given of denial of housing benefits to a family with arrangements to stay with a relative for three nights while waiting for the benefits to be processed. Another telling example heard at the RECD conferences had to do with housing that was so severely dilapidated that, in an urban area with building codes and inspections, it would have been condemned. "Building condemned" is a category that puts a household in a top priority position to receive aid from public housing authorities — but few rural areas have codes, inspections, or condemnations. And there is no category of "*should* be condemned" that establishes a household as a top priority for housing assistance. In the absence of such specific definitional changes, HUD's interpretation of "literally homeless" should be broadened to take into account more than people's immediate circumstances.

• Develop an 'ideal' definition to meet people's needs

Most conference participants would encourage efforts to develop a working definition of rural homelessness that encompasses a continuum of housing distress, attached to a funding stream that allows service providers to meet needs for housing relief regardless of where people fall on the continuum.

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[27] G. E. Peterson et al., *The Reagan Block Grants: What Have We Learned?* Urban Institute, Washington, DC, 1986.

• Work through mainstream agencies

Given the existing capabilities of the mainstream services network for serving homeless people in rural areas, it makes sense to enhance this capacity rather than trying to build an entirely new structure of homeless-specific services. Thus federal agencies with responsibilities for meeting rural needs might want to provide additional funding to mainstream agencies that are already integrated into the homeless service network, with such funding earmarked for serving homeless individuals and families.

The view that "homeless money should be kept together" in homeless-specific services, rather than distributed among mainstream agencies, probably reflects an urban reality in which there may be little or no mainstream agency involvement in serving homeless people. Since this situation is different in rural areas, where, in many cases, mainstream agencies more closely approximate an integrated service delivery network, federal policymakers and program administrators should take advantage of — and try to reinforce — these agencies' networking capabilities.

• Recognize and address isolation and service scarcity

Funders of rural homeless services need to allow programs the flexibility to structure themselves according to community need — and community need in rural areas may not look the same as in urban areas, due as much to geography as to anything else. Four immediate implications of the RECD conferences in this regard are:

1. Support staff time and transportation expenses to do extensive outreach. Outreach is not a luxury in rural areas; it provides crucial access to services.

2. Support communication aids such as fax machines, computer equipment to enable internet linkage and possibly even the recording of standardized intake and other program information. These aids should help overcome the isolation of agencies, leading to more efficient use of existing services and development of new ones.

3. Recognize that rural areas cannot support specialized shelter facilities for subgroups of the homeless population such as single men, single women, and families. Most rural shelters serve all homeless persons; federal funding guidelines that downgrade an application because it does not separate subgroups make it harder for rural facilities to compete for funding.

4. Recognize the importance of strengthening services that are not specific to but vitally needed by the homeless population. In particular, if the problem of inadequate resources to address substance abuse and mental illness problems is acute in urban areas, it is overwhelming in rural areas. Most communities have no such services. Further, the few services that do exist, often at considerable distance, may not be accessible to people without health insurance. Women with children have a particularly difficult time using the few services that do exist, since little help is available for taking care of the children while their mother is in treatment. Accordingly, *strengthening the entire infrastructure of rural social services is, or should be, of the highest priority in addressing the problems of rural homelessness.*

Opportunities for RECD

• Develop better data

There is an obvious and urgent necessity for improved information on both the numbers and the needs of the rural homeless population. Public and private agencies alike have an obligation to support efforts to conduct local, statewide, regional and national surveys specifically designed to develop reliable data on rural homelessness. In that regard, an important step has been taken via RECD's support, through the Interagency Council on the Homeless, of a forthcoming Census Bureau survey of rural as well as urban homeless assistance providers and clients.[28]

Under even the most optimistic of scenarios, the problem of rural homelessness is unlikely to receive the attention it deserves from policymakers and the public until the scope of the problem and its ramifications can be better quantified. Similarly, measuring the effectiveness of various strategies to prevent and to alleviate rural homelessness requires having better baseline data than is now generally available. On the other hand, the absence of an adequate national database on rural homelessness should not be allowed to become a pretext for indifference, inaction, or denial of the existence of the problem.

• Deploy agency resources for maximum effectiveness

Within RECD, the rural homelessness conferences provided an opportunity to create heightened awareness both of the rural homelessness problem and of the important work being done by service providers on behalf of homeless people. Staff from 35 RECD State Offices attended the conferences, and many reported that this was their first opportunity to fully explore the extent of the problem, face to face with those who are on the front lines as advocates, service providers, and service users.

With staff conference participants taking a lead role, RECD's State and National Offices will be able to contribute to networking and coalition-building in several ways:

- *Broaden networking at the national level,* under the auspices of the Interagency Council on the Homeless, in order to strengthen ties to public agencies, nonprofit organizations, and philanthropies interested in focusing on rural homelessness.

  To promote this process at the federal level, RECD expects to work closely with, for example, the Department of Housing and Urban Development on definitional and shared service-delivery issues; the Department of Labor on employment and jobs-trainining issues; the Department of Health and Human Services on comprehensive health care issues; the Department of Transportation on issues related to rural outreach and public transportation; the Department of Education on school-based programs to increase awareness of homelessness and to support adult education; and the Department of Veterans Affairs on efforts to reach and serve the large numbers of veterans among the rural homeless population.

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[28] The first phase of this survey, interviews with service providers, is under way, with the second phase — interviews with service users — scheduled for February 1996.

• *Join statewide homeless coalitions* (which now exist in nearly all states), with the RECD State Office's Homeless Services Coordinator working in partnership with coalition members from rural areas. One immediate benefit of this activity is to increase the probability that within a given state the problems of rural as well as urban homelessness will receive balanced attention.

• *Create a network of RECD State Homeless Services Coordinators* to share information — particularly on what works, and where, in the broad area of homelessness prevention — and to offer assistance and training in homelessness issues and services.

• *Intensify efforts to work with others on rural development issues,* recognizing that homelessness does not take place in isolation from other causes, and that RECD efforts to promote and support healthy rural communities — offering a range of economic and employment opportunities and support services — will help to reduce the incidence of homelessness.

• *Explore every opportunity to use RECD programs to complement local efforts to help homeless people,* including taking steps, where appropriate, to:

Market program inventory housing to qualifying homeless persons in cooperation with local homeless services providers;

Promote use of RECD's community facilities program to support services to homeless individuals and families;

Encourage use of self-help and other housing resources to promote the transition to self-sufficiency among homeless persons;

Set aside earmarked Section 502 housing loan funds for homeless rural people, working in partnership with nonprofit organizations that serve homeless individuals and families who are demonstrably on their way to self-sufficiency but who lack housing;

Promote training in homelessness issues for rural rental housing managers who seek to accommodate homeless people, in particular by linking rental housing managers with local advocates and service providers;

Examine the feasibility of setting aside a number of rental assistance units at the National level for State offices to draw upon in situations where a local homeless coalition working in partnership with RECD can use a rental assistance unit to help a homeless individual or family make the transition to a non-rental-assisted RECD rural rental housing unit.

RECD's four 1995 conferences on rural homelessness demonstrated, beyond a doubt, that the problem of rural homelessness is real, widespread, severe, and increasing. For policymakers and program administrators, the immediate challenge is to ensure that (1) rural homelessness receives the attention that the problem requires, and (2) the resources available are put to the best possible use in helping to meet the needs of those who are without a place to call home. ■

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